

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING**  
**Minutes of December 7, 2021**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell (absent), Vice-Chair Julie H. Goodrich, Board members Nathaniel Miller, Charles Morse, and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Peter J. DeMasi (Fire Chief), John Helfant (Police Chief), Karie Tucker (Police Department), Sara Lique (Police Department), Brian Gosselin (Police Department), Laura Hill-Eubanks, Carolyn Stevens, and Elroy Hill.

Acting Chair Goodrich called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. Participants had the option of attending the meeting either in person or remotely through Go-to-Meeting.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIENCE.** Those persons present were asked to rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The remote contingent also participated as much as possible.

- III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):** None.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

- a. Proposed FY 2022/2023 Town Budget.** Manager Schulz noted the Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) budget originally was scheduled for discussion this evening but this has been postponed to a later time.

- 1. Northfield Fire Department (NFD).** Manager Schulz noted the proposed NFD operations and maintenance (O&M) budget for FY 2022/2023 currently is set at \$93,970, which is a 6.1% increase from the current fiscal year. The bulk of this increase is due to scheduled wage increases for the NFD officers and firefighters. He then asked NFD Chief Peter J. DeMasi to discuss the proposed NFD budget. Chief DeMasi noted the Dispatching line item will increase from \$17,560 to \$18,000 and he expects this amount to rise higher in future years. The diesel fuel budget has been lowered from \$1,800 to \$1,500 to better match past actual expenditures. The Personal Protective Equipment line item will increase by \$500 due to an increase in the cost of materials. The Building Maintenance/Supplies line item will decrease by \$700 as recent upgrades to the Fire Station have reduced maintenance costs.

In the NFD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, the Building Improvements budget has a \$4,956.73 balance with \$2,500 to be added in FY 2022/2023. Manager Schulz said significant amounts were added to this budget in recent years to fund much-needed Fire Station improvements, such as installing a new heating system, new windows, etc. The building now is in good shape overall. Chief DeMasi agreed but also noted some work still needs done on the building's bathrooms. Also, the blacktop at the Fire Station will need to be repaved eventually. The amount now budgeted should be sufficient for the time being.

In the NFD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, there is a \$6,300 balance in the Equipment/Hose/Pump account with \$7,000 to be added in FY 2022/2023. Chief DeMasi said much of the current equipment installed on the fire trucks needs to be replaced over the next couple years and this amount should be sufficient. \$1,000 will be added to both the Pagers and Radio Replacement CEP budgets as this equipment also will need phased-in replacements in the near future.

As part of its current agreement with the municipality, Norwich University (NU) provides \$20,000 each year for the eventual replacement of the 2000 aerial ladder truck. This replacement is scheduled for FY 2027/2028 and the municipality budgets an additional \$11,500 annually for this purpose. A new CEP budget has been created for the replacement of the 2021 tanker truck, which is not expected until FY 2046/2047. \$14,000 will be put into this account each year for the foreseeable future. Replacement of the 2007 pumper truck is scheduled for FY 2028/2029 and the 2017 pumper truck in FY 2038/2039. Funds will be set aside each year in these CEP accounts for this purpose, with \$10,000 for the former and \$10,500 for the latter. Chief DeMasi then asked if there were any questions regarding these proposed budgets.

Board member Miller asked if Chief DeMasi really expected the new tanker truck to have a twenty-five (25) year life expectancy. Chief DeMasi said this particular vehicle is not used on callouts as frequently as other NFD trucks so this lifespan certainly is feasible. The other Board members had no questions. Manager Schulz has heard that there will be significant communications upgrades related to the Mutual Aid program. He asked if there will be additional local expenditures that should be reflected in the next fiscal year budget. Chief DeMasi confirmed that there will be a significant upgrade that will involve installing new communication towers in order to provide stronger radio signals and reduce interference from other sources. The upgrade will not start until the next fiscal year and Chief DeMasi expected local costs to increase by about \$15,000 per year starting with the FY 2023/2024 budget. Manager Schulz said this additional cost will be addressed during next year's budget sessions. Acting Chair Goodrich then thanked Chief DeMasi for his budget presentation.

2. **Northfield Police Department (NPD).** Manager Schulz said the NPD O&M budget will increase by 17.2% (from \$865,080 to \$1,014,030) in the next fiscal year. The bulk of this increase is due to increased personnel costs. The municipality made a mid-contract wage increase this past year as NPD officer retention was such a concern that the action seemed justified. There is a statewide shortage of qualified law enforcement officers that is driving the increase in salaries for local police officers. A new union contract affecting NPD officers will be negotiated over the next few months and the appropriate level of officer compensation will be a major issue.

Chief Helfant then provided an overview of the proposed NPD budgets for FY 2022/2023. He noted the Personnel Services budget will increase by 18.9% in the next fiscal year due to the aforementioned wage increases. He noted the NPD remains short-staffed due to a full-time officer now on military deployment. The part-time officers that have been hired are working full-time hours to make up this shortfall. Chief Helfant said it has been increasingly difficult to find qualified police officers in Vermont and this is the driving force behind the wage increases. He recently had a number of applicants for part-time positions but didn't hire any of them because they were too young, unqualified, and/or would not be a good fit for the NPD. Chief Helfant noted there was a slight decrease in NPD employee health insurance costs due to changes in employee coverage plans, etc.

Chief Helfant noted that other than personnel costs, most of the line items in his budget are fairly static with only minor increases. In the Contract Services budget, the Professional Services line item will increase from \$700 to \$1,000 due to higher charges for polygraph tests of new employees, etc. The Administrative budget will have a 1.1% increase due to slightly higher budgets for telephone service and the insurance covering the Police Station's boiler and other building machinery. The Materials/Supply budget will increase by 2.3% with slightly higher budgets for department supplies and building maintenance. The increase is mostly due to the recent inflation that is raising the cost of many routinely purchased items.

In the NPD CIP budget, the balance in the Building Improvements account is \$7,666 with \$2,500 to be added in FY 2022/2023. Chief Helfant said a recent purchase affecting this budget was the purchase of four (4) new building surveillance cameras. There are eight (8) other cameras in the Police Station and some of them also will need to be replaced in the near future.

In the NPD CEP budget, the 2014 Ford Explorer will be replaced in the next fiscal year using \$45,000 in previous year surplus funds. Funds also will be set aside in the budget for the eventual replacement of the 2018 Ford Explorer (FY 2024/2025), the 2019 Ford Explorer (FY 2025/2026) and the 2020 Ford Explorer (FY 2026/2027), averaging about \$7,600 in new funding each year for each vehicle. Funds also are being set aside for the scheduled replacement of office equipment including printers/copiers and computers. The seven (7) body cameras were purchased in 2020 so their replacement is not expected for another ten (10) years. \$700 is being budgeted each year for their eventual replacement. The purchase of the seven (7) tasers was through a five (5) year payment plan, now in its third year. Chief Helfant then asked if there were any questions regarding his proposed budget.

Board member Miller asked why NPD officer wage increases are being put into the next fiscal year budget before negotiations for the next NPD union contract have even begun. Manager Schulz said the proposed NPD personnel budget was drafted to reflect the aforementioned mid-contract wage rises as well as a percentage increase based on the current union contract. An additional amount also was included based on a rough guess of what will be in the next union contract. Board member Miller thought the mid-contract increase was a temporary measure that would be reassessed when the next contract was being negotiated. He feels including significant personnel cost increases in the proposed budget undermines the municipality's bargaining position in the upcoming negotiations. It makes it appear that concessions have already been made by management. Chief Helfant understands this concern about anticipating salary increases in the proposed budget but noted there was language in the agreement that led to the mid-contract wage increase indicating that the wage increase was to be in effect until the next NPD union contract has been approved and signed. If this salary adjustment is taken away, Chief Helfant doesn't think Northfield will have a police department for very long as there would be a mass exodus of officers to other law enforcement agencies. He noted the Berlin Police Department and other regional departments have been adept at hiring away police officers with promises of higher wages, etc.

Acting Chair Goodrich also did believe the mid-contract wage increase was presented as a temporary measure at the time. She did feel the proposed budget reflects the best current estimate of how much it will cost to operate the NPD in the next fiscal year. Board member Miller understands the difficulty in budgeting employee compensation for the future when there will ongoing union negotiations taking place over the coming months. However, he doesn't favor including significant wage increases in the budget prior to those negotiations. Acting Chair Goodrich noted there have been recent increases in the regional cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) amount and this also has been reflected in the proposed budget. Chief Helfant said that the inflation rate is now more than six percent (6%). As a non-union employee, he noted his own salary is projected to increase 5.7% in the next fiscal year. Although he doesn't like to bring up his own compensation in public meetings, Chief Helfant said he now is the lowest paid police chief in Washington County. The police chiefs of similarly-sized departments make about \$10,000 more per year than he does. The chiefs of the larger departments make more than \$20,000 more. Even with the salary increase, he will remain the lowest paid police chief in the region.

Board member Stevens is glad that the NPD is getting rid of the 2014 Ford Explorer, as this vehicle had become a money pit for repair bills. He is very happy it is being replaced with a new vehicle. He then asked how many employees the NPD currently has. Chief Helfant said the NPD table of organization calls for a police chief, six (6) full-time officers, and an administrative dispatcher. There is no set limit on the number of part-time officers but he now has two (2) on the roster. Board member Stevens asked how many of the full-time officers are filling patrolling shifts. Chief Helfant said five (5) plus himself. One full-time officer remains on military deployment until October 2022.

Board member Morse asked if the proposed NPD personnel budget included an expected salary increase based on the new union contract. Manager Schulz said a slight increase (3.5%) was factored into the budget in anticipation of what will be in the new contract. This is in addition to the mid-contract wage increase. Acting Chair Goodrich asked if the anticipated wage increase should be included in the proposed budget. Manager Schulz said that would be the Select Board's decision. He had discussed this matter with Chief Helfant and they decided to present an NPD budget for FY 2022/2023 that would be as accurate as possible based on current projections. Acting Chair Goodrich suggested it might be best to have the Labor Agreement and Bargaining Subcommittee (Board members Goodrich and Maxwell), which will be negotiating the next NPD union contract, discuss this matter and provide a recommendation to the full Select Board whether or not the anticipated wage increase should be included in the proposed NPD budget. Board member Miller thought this was acceptable. A subcommittee meeting will be scheduled in the near future.

Elroy Hill felt if there is the strong suspicion that NPD wages will increase in the next fiscal year, that should be reflected in the proposed budget. Otherwise, there might be a significant shortfall in the NPD personnel budget at the end of the next fiscal year for which the department might be blamed by members of the public.

Laura Hill-Eubanks feels the NPD does not sufficiently enforce the municipality's Disorderly Conduct Ordinance as it pertains to excessive vehicle noise, especially motorcycles. Perhaps the NPD budget should be increased by \$1,500 to purchase a sound meter so NPD officers would be able to have solid readings of excessive noise levels that could be taken to court. Acting Chair Goodrich said this purchase could be considered. Chief Helfant said the municipality's ordinance states, "It shall be unlawful for any person to make or cause to be made loud or unreasonable noise. Noise shall be deemed unreasonable when it disturbs, injures or endangers the peace or health of another or when it endangers the health, safety or welfare of the community." He felt this language allowed for much subjectivity. In addition, it is very difficult to prosecute excessive noise violations in Vermont because recent court rulings make it necessary for police officers to obtain warrants for almost all of their interactions with the public. This includes asking a driver or motorcyclist to rev their engines to take a noise meter reading. Chief Helfant doubts any Vermont judge would sign a warrant due to a suspected loud vehicle. He said the best time to enforce laws regarding excessive vehicle noise is during the vehicle inspection process as state regulations provides the inspector with the right to measure vehicle noise and refuse certification if the decibel level is excessive. If the vehicle is subsequently driven without an inspection sticker, this is a ticketing offense to be enforced by police officers. Chief Helfant said there currently is no methodology in Vermont for police officers to conduct roadside enforcement of suspected vehicle noise violations.

Ms. Hill-Eubanks noted police officers don't need warrants to arrest speeders. Chief Helfant said there are specific state statutes governing speeding offences that accept the reliability of speed radar readings. There is no similar state statute support for noise meters. Ms. Hill-Eubanks asked if it would be possible to revise the local ordinance to remove the ambiguity and specify unacceptable noise levels in decibels. Chief Helfant said this would require much study and research in order to determine the prohibited decibel level. There also would remain the aforementioned problem of obtaining a noise meter reading without a warrant. Ms. Hill-Eubanks asked why Vermont State Police officers enforce prohibitions on excessive vehicle noise. Chief Helfant said he served in the Vermont State Police for twenty-eight (28) years and neither he nor any of his colleagues enforced excessive vehicle noise laws. Ms. Eubanks-Hill said many Northfield residents are unhappy with the current situation with excessive car and motorcycle noise on our streets. She felt a way should be found to enforce the local noise ordinance and there also needs to be the will power to do it.

**V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED).** There was none.

**VI. ADJOURNMENT.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to adjourn. **Motion passed 4-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 7:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of December 14, 2021.